

*Resettlement
housing
job*

The Initial Difficulties Experienced by
H. Oda After Returning to Berkeley

Interviewed on May 31, 1945
Recorded by RN

Mr. H. Oda came into my office at approximately 11:30 a.m. He wanted to see either DST or JS but, finding both of them out, he came to talk with me. Mr. O is about twenty-nine years old, married, and has two children--two years old and ten months old. They are now residing in the Topaz Relocation Center. He has an aged invalid mother. Also, he has a brother and his wife and four children. They are all at Topaz, where they are occupying the apartment adjoining his wife's.

Mr. O is about five feet-five inches tall and about 130 pounds in weight. He wore a sports coat and appeared very neat. His face is long with narrow horizontal eyes. He has a pleasing personality and smiles readily. His manner is courteous and cordial, and he seems to be well accommodated to Caucasians.

Mr. O is a graduate of the University of California in the class of 1936. He has a B.S. degree in accounting. He lived in Berkeley with his parents and brother while attending college. His father was employed in Berkeley as a gardener. After graduation, he applied for a job at several Caucasian firms, but he was not employed. He attributed these rejections to racial discrimination. Seeing the futility of obtaining a job in the field for which he had been trained, he worked as a gardener in Berkeley, helping his father. Later, with two other Japanese, he was employed by a

Japanese general merchandise store in Santa Maria. He stated that he took care of all the bookkeeping aspects of the firm. After about two years in Santa Maria, he was called back to Berkeley, for his father's health was failing. Then he took over his father's business. (Mr. O did not mention anything about his father after this point. It is presumed that his father died soon afterwards).

Mr. O said that he could not be satisfied with the work as a gardener and soon he set out to look for some opening in more attractive fields. "I couldn't see any future in gardening. I didn't want to end up as a gardener." After a certain amount of effort, he obtained a common laborer's job in the East Oakland shop of the Southern Pacific Company. Within several months afterwards, he advanced to the position of storekeeper, for he was well liked by his foreman and his fellow workers. In the shop stockroom, he kept the records and handled the issuance and receiving of stock. From time to time thereafter, he expressed to his foreman his desire to work in the accounting department, preferably in the cost accounting section, of the Southern Pacific Company; however, the foreman warned him to be patient and wait. Although he was working hard to better his position, the world events were not moving in his favor. He realized that he could not fulfill his ambition when Pearl Harbor was attacked in December, 1941, and the intense anti-Japanese agitation began to crop up in California soon afterwards. In line with the popular trend, the Southern Pacific Company terminated all employees of Japanese ancestry in February, 1942, and Mr. O was let out with two other Japanese from the Oakland shop.

Mr. O stated that he was very anxious to "move ahead in the world." As stated above, he was trying to get in the accounting department of the Southern Pacific Company, but he realized that the chance was rather remote. Therefore, he thought that he might do better in a federal job. In the latter part of 1941, he took a Federal Civil Service examination and received a rating of 94.8. Later, he received certification for Federal Civil Service appointment. He then applied for a job with the Internal Revenue Division of the Treasury Department. Before he could get an appointment, the evacuation took place.

Sometime prior to Pearl Harbor (I failed to ascertain the date), he married an Issei girl, who is a graduate of the University of California. He was apologetic about the alien status of his wife, and explained that although technically she is an Issei, she does not act like one. "She is very much Americanized as I am."

At the time of evacuation, he owned a house on McGee Street near Delaware in Berkeley. (It was told by DST afterwards that this house is located in a respectable, solid middle-class residential district). It was necessary for him to lease this house, and he was thinking of having a real estate agent handle this affair. However, his Caucasian neighbor, with whom Mr. and Mrs. Oda were friendly, persuaded them to lease the house to a friend of hers. Trusting his Caucasian neighbor, he agreed to this arrangement. He said, "Anyone whom my neighbor trusted was okay with me." The Caucasian tenants were a couple; the man is a traveling salesman of some big concern and is often out of town, and his wife works for the Southern Pacific Company in San Francisco.

They wanted a lease for the house for the duration, while Mr. O wanted to lease it for one year and beyond the first year on a monthly basis, because he wanted to regain the possession of the house at any time after the first year with a thirty-day notice. Mr. O claims that the tenants agreed to his terms verbally, and asked a real estate agent to handle all matters pertaining to the house, including the drawing up of the lease and the collection of rents. (The house was leased for forty-five dollars a month). The lease was drawn up (probably after the evacuation), but as it reads now, there seems to be some misunderstanding in it. To Mr. O's surprise, it states in part, ". . . . one year and thereafter month by month for the duration." Because of this phraseology, Mr. O is facing legal difficulties now.

For sometime he had wanted to bring his family and his parent out to Berkeley. About three weeks ago, he came out here alone to prepare for the return of the others. After arriving in Berkeley, he went to see the Caucasian tenants for the purpose of notifying them that the house be vacated. But the tenants were not in any way cooperative; they refused to vacate the house on the ground that the lease had allegedly been made out for the duration. Mr. O reminded them of the original conversation relating to the fact that he did not wish to lease it on a permanent basis. The negotiation, however, resulted in arguments; and seeing the futility of persuading the tenants and sensing the difficulty of the legal aspect, he took the matter to his lawyer. "I knew I couldn't handle it myself," he confessed. The lawyer is now negotiating for the repossession of the property and has served a thirty-day notice ^{to vacate} ~~for vacation~~. Mr. O

hopefully stated that he may be able to get the house back on June 23 if his lawyer succeeds in his present attempt, but he reflected, "You can't tell what might happen."

Mr. O has other grievances against the Caucasian tenants. At the time of evacuation, he partitioned one side of the garage and stored his personal belongings. In the garage his automobile was also stored. The tires were taken off and the chassis was placed on wooden blocks. When he came back to the house three weeks ago, he found a number of his belongings missing. Among them were a vacuum cleaner, tires, battery, garage tools, lawn mower, etc. Some of the items belonging to his friends, which he had stored together with his own, were also missing. Upon questioning, the Caucasian admitted that he had sold "some of those things." When Mr. O asked what the Caucasian would do about the situation, he expressed regret and stated that he had not expected Oda to come back to California. He was willing to replace the lost articles. When Mr. O reminded him of the fact that many of these things were not replaceable for the duration and advanced the idea of financial restitution, the Caucasian backed out and stated that he could not pay for them. "Some of those things aren't worth the money." Mr. O said that he was willing to forget about all of these things as a "bad business deal" if he could regain possession of the house.

Incidentally, the business transactions surrounding the lease of his house were in an unfortunate condition. He had found out that the house had not been registered with the OPA. He had not received the monthly rent from the agent to whom the house was entrusted for the past year. He stated that the house problem was

the primary reason for his coming back to Berkeley because "I was so worried about it."

On the second day after arriving in Berkeley, however, he was able to straighten out the account with his real estate agent without much difficulty. He said, "You know how these one-man agencies keep their books. He couldn't tell what's what, but I was lucky that I could get my money on the second day."

Mr. O's evacuation experience seems to have been satisfactory and uneventful. First, he went to Tanforan; then, he was transferred to Topaz. Because of his training, he was anxious to get some actual experience while working for the Topaz project, for he thought "this is the best opportunity to get started and use my knowledge to an advantage." Therefore, he obtained a position in the cost accounting section of the Administrative Management Division. Later on, since his ability as an accountant was highly regarded, both by the appointed staff and the evacuees, he was persuaded by members of the Cooperative Enterprises to handle the fiscal division of the organization. He said that he was so much interested in this work that he was willing to expend his maximum effort and work overtime at nights. "It was so fascinating. I had a real experience which will help me in the future. I enjoyed it very much."

In March, 1943, after nine months with the Cooperative Enterprises, he decided to relocate "because I was afraid I might be drafted." He had been classified as 3A due to dependency and hardship, for his mother was invalid and he had to support his family. However, with the reinstitution of the Selective Service

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to the Nisei in January, 1943, he was reclassified 1-A. He left Topaz on indefinite leave to Montana. He worked as a farm hand and received deferment easily. He was not satisfied with the farm job, and changed to some job connected with a railroad company (probably a section hand) without notifying the change of occupation to the local draft board. In the end, however, the board "caught up with me" and he was reclassified 1-A. The reclassification, it seems, happened not long ago. As soon as he came to Berkeley, he appeared before the local draft board and presented his family condition. "I said to them that if you think I should go, I am willing to go. I'll go anytime." He explained to the board that his mother is very old and is troubled with high blood pressure. "The latest medical report showed that she has the count of 205."

When he presented the situation of his family to the draft board, the interviewer was very sympathetic. However, she stated that she could not defer him on a dependency basis, and his hardship case was not sufficient. On the other hand, she said that she was willing to present his case to the board members as a special hardship case because he is trying to relocate the members of his family from a relocation center to Berkeley. The case was heard by the board ~~members~~ and deferment was granted. When he appeared for the decision, the board members were very cordial and sympathetic to him. They came out of the hearing room and shook hands with him, stating that they were sorry for his plight and that they would do everything possible to help him. When Mr. O explained that he was looking for a job, the members expressed their willingness to assist him in his search for employment. Mr. O said to me that he felt very

happy that there were so many kind people.

About ten days ago, he began his search for a job, although he said he was not particularly worried about it. He wanted to ascertain what chances he had for getting a respectable position. He knew that when worse comes to worst, he could always work as a gardener or domestic. With this curiosity, he consulted the U.S. Employment Service in Berkeley. There the interviewer gave him three job leads. (The interviewer did not consider the fact that he is a Japanese American. She merely pulled out three job opportunities from the vacancies for accountants). These leads were as follows: The Ford Motor Company, the Durkee Food Company, and the General Cable Company. At the first two places he was turned down and told that his being Japanese American might cause trouble among other employees of the company. At the General Cable Company, however, he was asked to fill out an application blank. Since there were several questions on the form which were hazy in his mind, he asked the assistance of the interviewer, but she was not cooperative and appeared to Mr. O as if she did not care whether he completed the form or not. At the end of the interview, the interviewer told Mr. O to come back after two days and that he must see the head of the Accounting Division, who had the final say on the employment. When he called the office after a two-day period, he was informed that the chief of the Accounting Division was not anxious to hire him because he had not had sufficient actual training in the particular field for which he had applied. Mr. O wanted to talk with the chief, but his request was denied. The interviewer was very polite, but Mr. O guessed that he was not wanted because of his race.

I suggested to Mr. O that it might be better for him to keep his mother and his family at Topaz. I gave the following reasons:

1. It is impossible to close the centers at the end of this year. The WRA will announce a change of its policy regarding closure
2. It might be difficult to get proper medical care for his mother on the outside.
3. His children are too young to be affected by the school closing.

To the first reason, he replied that the WRA will carry on with the original plan. He thought that the government wanted to "clean out" these centers, and will push the program. "That's the desire of the government. I think it will be better to cooperate with the government policy." To the second reason, he stated that he has a Caucasian family doctor still practicing in Berkeley. Mr. O was certain that his mother will get proper attention, because "the doctor knows her case well." For the third reason, he argued, "I am very lonesome. Are you married"? When I assured him that I knew what he was trying to say, he added, "Well, that's what it is."

Then, Mr. O asked me how I would go about in searching for a job if I were in his position. I told him that I would go to a WRA local office and would find out what kinds of jobs were available. He was interested in this, and in the end I promised him that I would get in touch with NS for job opportunities.

At about 1:30 Mr. O left my office. I had promised him that I would let him know as soon as I heard any job opening.

Afterwards, I presented the case to NS. She told me that the Stanford University Hospital was looking for a competent accountant. The Hospital in San Francisco had agreed to hire several Japanese Americans and had submitted the offers to the San Francisco District

Office of the WRA. Among them was an accountant position which required university training. Upon her request, Mr. O was immediately notified to get in touch with her the next morning. The result is not yet known.